



LIFESAVING SOCIETY

*The Lifeguarding Experts*

For immediate release

## **Study Reveals Drowning Among Older Adults is Increasing**

*Research indicates a steep upward trend for drownings  
among adults 65+ in Canada*

**July 12, 2021** – A recently published study analyzing 10 years of unintentional fatal drowning data from Australia, Canada and New Zealand indicates that the proportion of drowning deaths that occurred among older adults increased from 15% to 24% over the period (2005–2014).

Using population projections, the authors estimate that by the year 2050, between 209 and 430 older adults (65+) will die from drowning in Canada each year, compared to an average of 81 per year during the study period.

### **Key findings**

- 812 older adults (65+) died from unintentional drowning in Canada during the 10-year study period.
- In Canada, the largest increase in older adult drowning deaths occurred among 65 to 74 year olds.
- 65 to 74 year olds were more likely to drown in natural open water (lakes, rivers, oceans) and represented a significant proportion of deaths while boating.
- Those in the 75+ age group were more likely to drown in bathtubs and private pools.
- The highest proportion of alcohol consumption among older adults who drowned was in Canada (20.7%).
- Chronic medical conditions were often present; however, further research is needed to understand if these conditions contributed to the drowning deaths.

### **Global population trends**

Globally, the highest drowning rates occur among children and youth. As a result, drowning prevention attention and investment have traditionally focused on young age groups. However, global estimates of drowning deaths among older adults (65+) have been increasing in recent decades, and in some developed countries, drowning rates among older adults are actually higher than among young children. The global population is aging and the number of older adults living globally is expected to double by 2050.

## Implications for Canada

With an aging population, drowning among older adults is becoming a progressively larger contributor to the overall drowning burden. Drowning prevention awareness should be considered a component of healthy aging.

Drowning prevention messaging for older adults should be targeted by age group. For younger seniors (65 to 74), the focus should be on increased safety around natural water and during boating and aquatic activities. For the older age groups (75+), the focus should be on preventing bathing-related drowning, unintentional falls into water and drowning while swimming in pools.

“The results of this international study confirm what we have observed in our analysis of drowning statistics in Canada,” says Barbara Byers, Senior Research Officer with the Lifesaving Society. “We believe this study has important findings for drowning prevention in Canada. We need to strengthen our drowning prevention messaging with the older adults target group to ensure they realize the importance of swimming and boating with a friend or family member, and to have someone else with them when they are in a backyard pool and to check on them regularly while in the bath.”

## Canadian drowning statistics

*Canada:* The most recent drowning data from coroner’s offices (2017) indicates that on average between 450 to 500 people drown in Canada each year. Older adults (65+) represent 22% of all drownings and their drowning rate per 100,000 population (1.7) is 42% higher than the overall drowning rate (1.2). Among older adults who drowned, 73% were alone and 80% were found not wearing a lifejacket while boating.

*Ontario:* On average, 150 to 175 people drown in Ontario each year, of which older adults represent 27%. The drowning rate of (1.9) is 73% higher than the overall drowning rate (1.1). Among older adults who drowned, 75% were alone and 81% were found not wearing a lifejacket while boating.

## About the study

The study, [\*Exploring a Hidden Epidemic: Drowning Among Adults Aged 65 Years and Older\*](#), was published in the Journal of Aging and Health 2021. The authors are Tessa Clemens PhD (Canada), Amy Peden PhD (Australia) and Richard C. Franklin PhD (Australia).

The study is a total population retrospective analysis of unintentional fatal drowning among people aged 65 years and older in Australia, Canada and New Zealand over a 10-year period (2005 to 2014). The authors analyzed the data and described trends in older adult drowning, and they estimated the burden of older adult drowning in the future if this problem is left unchecked.

The data were acquired from drowning prevention organizations. Australian data were sourced from the National Fatal Drowning Database of Royal Life Saving Society – Australia. Data for Canada were obtained from the Drowning Prevention Research Centre Canada database. New Zealand data were sourced from DrownBase, the official database of Water Safety New Zealand.

### **About the Lifesaving Society**

The Lifesaving Society is a full-service provider of programs, products and services designed to prevent drowning. We save lives and prevent water-related injury through our training programs, Water Smart public education, drowning research, aquatic safety management and lifesaving sport. We are a national volunteer organization and registered charity composed of ten provincial/territorial branches, tens of thousands of individual members, and over 4,000 affiliated swimming pools, waterfronts, schools and clubs. The Lifesaving Society is a leader and partner in the delivery of water safety education throughout Canada and around the world.

### **About the Drowning Prevention Research Centre Canada**

The Drowning Prevention Research Centre (DPRC) – the lead agency for drowning and water-incident research in Canada – extracts water-related death data for Canadian provinces and territories from the offices of chief coroners and medical examiners. Interim, preliminary data is derived from media releases, media clippings, news reports and internet searches. This interim data is verified and included in the coroner data collection process when the coroner data becomes available.

Based on its analysis, the DPRC produced the 2020 edition of the *Canadian Drowning Report* infographic (in English and French). This report highlighted 2013–2017 drownings, the most recent five-year period for which complete data is available.

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### **To schedule an interview or for more information please contact:**

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